

HORACE P. BECK

SAY SOMETHING DIRTY!

CERTAINLY THE COLLECTING of erotic material is based upon the most delicate kind of definitions. The happy thought that all one need do is to go into a folk group, smile, and say, "Now say something dirty," will hardly do. This paper will perforce cross paths with Halpert's. However, before mentioning any items that might conflict with either of my colleagues, I would like to kill one snake.

I do not collect erotic folklore, and I do not suggest that anyone else collect erotic folklore—if by the term is meant to go out into the field solely for the purpose of collecting the obscene, the pornographic, or the erotic. To go into the field with the demand of "say something dirty" is folly. We often hear the early collectors were castigated because they did not collect erotica but stuck pretty much to "acceptable" kinds of material. Although the validity of such statements might well be questioned, and although one might point out that it is hard to conform to values highly respected in the middle of the twentieth century while living in the eighteenth or nineteenth, it seems to me that by concentrating on erotica we may be leaving ourselves open to this same criticism from the twenty-first century. The first commandment for any collector going into the field is the same as the command given to the helmsman on board ship: "Take it as it comes." Emerson said, "Nothing is good alone," and nowhere is this more true than in collecting folklore. It is not in erotica, in Child ballads, in folk art, in play-party games that we are interested, but in folk-culture. Folk-culture is the sum of its parts, and the varieties in these parts is one of the characteristics that sets one group off from another. It is the collector's duty to try to recapture with all the skills at his command a particular folk-culture and to do this to stimulate, only as necessary, the entire pattern and not one segment of it. Later on, if he chooses, he may select a certain item or items for particularly close study—bearing in mind that he is studying an item and not a culture.

One can hardly stress too strongly the importance of going into the field with an open mind. One never knows what he may find on a trip, and to go forth armed to take one thing may mean not only an empty-handed return, but a loss of something valuable. I recall going to Quebec with the late Frank Speck nearly twenty years ago to collect block printing among the Indians. We returned with no block prints but with a wealth of material ranging from coital practices and legends to a collection of bird skin ornaments and crossbows. To have clung to block printing would have made our trip futile. On another occasion, I was collecting material in northern Maine and was most interested in folksongs. Several times informants offered to sing a song called "Robin Redbreast." Thinking that it had to do with a popular song, I declined, only to discover too late that it was in reality an alias for "The Banks of the Gaspereaux," a relatively rare woods song. Had I acted like Speck, I would have collected it; and if it had turned out to be a popular song, it could have been edited in the laboratory. This leads us into the problem of "recreating the folk-culture," and of the role of the collector.

As soon as the word folk-culture is mentioned, we automatically find ourselves set-

ting up two groups, the "in" group and the "out" group—the "in" group representing the folk being studied, and the "out" group being the collector and assistants, if there be any. The collector is generally an ethnic stranger. At least he comes from away, is not of the group, may not speak the same language or dialect, and is only rudimentally conversant with their way of life. In nearly all respects he may be different from the people he is studying, and even if he isn't, he is doing something out of the ordinary—collecting folklore. As a result there is a barrier between scholar and informant that is hard to breach; yet the degree to which it is breached may well determine the success of the study.

It is the collector's first chore to try to become accepted, and to do this he must adhere to the code expected of strangers. MacEdward Leach and I were once inveighed against for collecting "sinful old timey love ballets." No matter how avid one is, it is wisdom to make haste slowly in attempting to start a flow of erotica. If erotica comes, it will come only after the collector and at least the informant have become acclimated to each other.

But let us assume for the moment that the collector is able to gather obscene material. This immediately brings us face to face with the problem of what is obscene and what use, if any, this material has. Is it real or imagined? Let us take some examples.

A dog running down the street darts into another dog's yard and urinates on the dog house. Is this an obscene act? Is the dog committing this act as a neurotic release from having to wear a dog license, or is he defying the dog catcher? Does he hope to arouse lust in some unknown female, or has he simply left his "calling card" in another yard or heeded the call of nature? Perhaps the former ideas are correct, but because he is a dog and we are humans, we tend to give him the benefit of the doubt and suggest the last two reasons—a charity we are unwilling to afford our fellow man.

Is it an obscene act to give a patient "nanny plum tea" to cure the colic? When a Pennsylvania German defecates in a sock and hangs it on his enemy's doorknob, is he being obscene or is he being insulting? Is one being obscene by pouring baby urine in the ear to cure earache? When a native shaman makes a fetish out of human excrement to cure a client or destroy an enemy, is he being obscene? Is he showing deepseated neuroses brought about by colonialism? Is it erotic to perform coitus by any method other than the one referred to by Kinsey in a talk a number of years ago as "the missionary method"?¹ To most of these questions the answer is probably no. Let me take another example.

In Rhode Island there is a story about two brothers—A. P. and E. P. White—who hated each other. One day A. P. entered the store and asked where E. P. was. He was told that the brother was in the privy. Snatching a revolver from a drawer, A. P. rushed outside and confronted the outhouse. "Which hole you on, north or south?" he shouted. The reply came back, "South one." Up came the revolver, and five shots went through the north side of the building. The door burst open, and out rushed the brother. "What you doing?" "I'll learn you never to lie to me." Was A. P. White committing an obscene act, or was he simply taking advantage of the moment? Is the storyteller amused most at the outhouse aspect, or is he stirred by the violence of the act?

Recently John Greenway published an album of folksongs from Australia.² One song tells of a man who had all kinds of vicissitudes beset him on the way to Gundagai. According to the text accompanying the record, his dog made the ruin of

the day complete by defecating in the box containing the food. Apparently feeling that the act would be considered obscene by the editors, Greenway sings the song as follows:

Twas getting dark, the team got bogged, the axle snapped in two.
I lost me matches and me pipe, now what was I to do?
The rain come down, 'twas bitter cold and hungry too was I,
And the dog sat in the tucker box—nine miles from Gundagai.

He concludes:

I won't forgive that bloody dog, nine mile from Gundagai.

Obviously to sophisticated ears the dog's act was one of obscenity, and by changing the word to "sat," a song is both cleaned up and made pointless. However, one must ask if perhaps this assumed obscenity is not a concept of sophistication. To the drover is this not simply a story amusing for its irony, for the dog, man's best friend, completed the disaster?

This question can be pushed backward in time in our own culture. Recently I encountered a volume entitled *Love in Action*,³ wherein are contained many quaint and curious customs concerning sexual acts. Among other things are a number of illustrations taken from cathedrals, books on canonical law and other religious sources depicting the drunken Noah, showing a monk being castrated for some mild transgression, and many illustrations of couples in *flagrante delicto*. When we consider the sources from which this material was taken, it is difficult to imagine that they were conceived for purely erotic purposes. It is our society that interprets them so. And going back still further, are we to consider the Song of Songs, and indeed large segments of the Old Testament as obscene, or simply as an expression of a people? Are the excesses of Zeus simply examples of erotica or tales of remarkable feats?

Obviously from the above remarks one cannot categorize something as obscene or "off-color" simply because it is "off-color" in our own society, nor can we consider special acts or ideas as being erotic simply because we do not copy them. A story was told me in one Indian group of a hunter who had relations with his bitch. As a result of this relationship there sprang up a family of hunters renowned for their tenacity, endurance, and general skill in hunting. The women of this family could be identified because they had an annoying habit of turning round and round in bed and whining in their sleep. Another group told me the same story, but this time the purpose of the tale was to explain the generally shiftless, craven ways of a particular family.⁴

A number of years ago MacEdward Leach and I were partially balked by a rash of religious fervor which forbade the singing of secular songs on the grounds that they were "sinful."⁵ The same group, however, was nothing loath to tell us about the excesses of various Lotharios in the community in some detail, feeling, apparently, that there was nothing wrong with this, but that there was a world of criminality in a Child ballad simply because it was sung.

In Maine I was told of the excesses of a woman who had a steady flow of male callers that resulted in several pregnancies. Each time the infant was strangled with its umbilicus and thrown into the compost heap to be spread upon the field in the

spring. In Philadelphia a similar tale was told, but the person in question was said to have "had her appendix removed" many times. In Maine the story demonstrated a kind of admiration for endurance; in Philadelphia it was told as erotica. Finally, in Nova Scotia I heard a man deliver a whole sentence of epithets to his oxen. When accused of swearing, he replied in astonishment that he never used a G. D. swear word in his life, by Jesus!

Another question arises to confront the collector, and that is not only what is obscene material to the group, but what material is indigenous and what material has been superimposed upon the society from without. Presently much in vogue among college students is an album of folksongs entitled *When Dalliance Was in Flower*.⁶ This is a compendium of erotic, obscene, and pornographic songs that have their origin mostly in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music halls and have been preserved not by the folk but by chapbooks and songsters. In somewhat purged editions they have been set going in the land from records. This is not folklore but rather sophisticated erotica, which, if it sifts down to the folk and is collected, must be viewed with care and discrimination.

What, then, is erotica? It is in the context rather than in the word or the subject. Perhaps the only thing I can say is that pornography, obscenity, lewdity, profanity, and erotica in general are determined by the manner in which they are received by the audience or treated by the informant. Roughly, when they are treated as taboo, they then fall into the above categories. They are discussed *sub rosa* and have the onus of impropriety. One selects the company and the place with care. In New England one is not likely to find this material told in the parlor, which is the "company" room, nor the kitchen, which is reserved for general sociability, but more often in areas where all men gather, like the liar's bench at the country store or, in the southern states, at the cattle pens.

From the above statements it becomes obvious that erotica is not likely to appear on a first visit and not until the collector is accepted into the community. The presentation of this material may, indeed, be an indication that the collector is at last in a measure accepted by the community. There still remains the problem of how this collecting process can be speeded up.

It may be done by selecting the time (somehow the morning never seems propitious), the place, the audience, the topics to discuss, and even by singing a bar or two of a song or telling part of a story. Perhaps the best audience is one made up of all the same group—preferably friends who know the informant and his repertoire. It has been claimed that both sexes spur the stories, but I have not found it so. If there are two informants present, one may attempt to outdo the other. When the collector knows the community and its particular idiosyncrasies, his collecting may also be speeded up. In Maine the mention of Gus Bailey will bring forth one reaction, of Larry Gorman another. Neither name will raise an eyebrow in Vermont.

Another problem that faces the collector is to put folk material in its proper perspective. This is difficult in any recording session but particularly difficult in the areas under discussion. Often in an all-male audience there comes a desire to compete that throws the normal pattern of folklore out of line. Again, one often is sent to nonrepresentative members of the society. Is the collector gathering norms, or is he taping the elephantine memory of some lusty old drake who has a reputation through all the country 'round for never forgetting a story or refraining from telling it? Further, because of the pride the community has in its narrator and the

desire to show off before the outsider, the recorder, our modern scop, may be urged far beyond his usual sportive attempts at entertainment, and the scholar will find he is collecting material quite out of its normal proportion.

Finally, let me state that although I have collected a fair number of erotic songs, stories, beliefs and whatnot, I have never deliberately sought them. I have never refused to collect them and have suggested that more would be well received. I do not recall a single incident when this material was presented to me on firsthand meetings but only on a second or third or later bout with the informants. This could be taken to mean, I suppose, one or two different things—either the informants did not consider erotica important, or they felt that this was closer to their secret selves. I hold to the former view.

To some scholars obscene folklore seems to be close to the blood and bone of folklore and seems always to be most closely attached to acts involving bodily functions and genitalia. The latter I think is an inaccurate evaluation; there is much that is obscene that has nothing to do with these functions. William Faulkner in recreating a folk-culture makes an obscene act out of eating gingersnaps. The Iroquois in their practices of torture often achieved the same result.

Perhaps it is true that this material represents deep-seated neuroses against evils and supposed evils in the society. However, this is a region where the scholar must tread lightly. The scholar looking for songs of social protest is often able to find immediately allegorical relationships that other scholars are able to see only after prolonged and deep study. Such relationships would startle the informants no end were they to learn about them. The same is true of erotica; and although to the scholar a tale of abortion may reflect a frustration complex brought about by the inability to return to the mother's womb, it is equally possible that such a story may have some simpler explanation for its popularity. I do not say that this is impossible, but I do suggest extreme caution in approaching the problem.

This does not mean that I would deplore the collection of erotic or obscene folklore. We should try to collect across the board, attempt to crystallize folk-culture at the moment of recording by putting it on tape and in notebooks. I am not sure we should not add a camera to our perservative instruments. We should strive first for normalcy. Erotica is part of every society. Its form, its degree of prevalence, help to set one group off from another. What to one group is obscene to another may be considered otherwise. Let us try when we are collecting not to make judgments based upon our own reactions to stimuli of this sort.

NOTES

1. This remark was made by Kinsey in a speech given at a regional meeting of the American Folklore Society in Bloomington, Indiana, in May 1955.

2. *Australian Folksongs* (Folkways FW 8718).

3. Fernando Henriques, *Love in Action, The Sociology of Sex* (New York, 1960).

4. F. G. Speck and H. P. Beck, "Old World Tales Among the Mohawks," *Journal of American Folklore*, LXIII (1950), 285-308.

5. This occurred on a collecting trip to the Blue Ridge Mountains in the spring of 1948.

6. *When Dalliance Was in Flower and Maidens Lost Their Heads* (Electra EKL-110).

Middlebury College
Middlebury, Vermont